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# The Hollywood Sports Film – Visualizing Hidden and Familiar Aspects of American Culture

Barbara Englert\*

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**Abstract:** »Der Hollywoodsportfilm. Eine Visualisierung verborgener und vertrauter Aspekte der amerikanischen Kultur«. This essay highlights a number of Hollywood sport films from the 1970s focusing on national and personal identity issues. Against the backdrop of contemporary history, the meaning of sports and film, and its pop cultural intertwinement becomes transparent revealing a basic pattern. Aspects come into the picture which from a European perspective seem both familiar and, in a way, hidden. Besides being great entertainment, sport films like *North Dallas Forty* (1979), *Semi-Tough* (1977) or *The Bad News Bears* (1976) have the quality to serve as a rich and meaningful archive of visual sources for research in the humanities.

**Keywords:** Hollywood sport films, American history, US sports, pop culture, identity issues, *North Dallas Forty*, *Semi-Tough*, *The Bad News Bears*.

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## 1. Introduction

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America is a giant hologram, in the sense that information concerning the whole is contained in each of its elements. Take the tiniest little place in the desert, any old street in a Mid-West town, a parking lot, a Californian house, a Burger King or a Studebaker, and you have the whole of the US [...]. (Baudrillard 1988, 29)

Consistent with this quotation by French philosopher Jean Baudrillard drawn from his 1980s travelogue *America*, the subject and thesis of this article asserts that if you take American sports and Hollywood cinema respectively the sports film, you get the whole of the United States of America. To put it another way, Hollywood sport films make hidden and familiar aspects of American culture visible. This is possible because, in terms of pop-cultural meaning, sports and Hollywood cinema are of vital importance.

When examining such a large, complex, and constantly expanding genre like the Hollywood sports film it is necessary to lay the focus on some key aspects. Along with the fact that this contribution centres on sport films from the 1970s the emphasis is also on national and personal identity. Like any other genre of that time sport films were influenced by the so-called New Hollywood Cinema and socio-politically stormy waters, a time when national and thereby

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personal identity was up for renegotiation. People who in the 1960s were actively engaged in the various countercultural movements finally wore themselves out. Initially, after decades of white male supremacy, they intended to change and restate the national (cultural) identity for the better. African Americans, American Indians, students (for a democratic society), women, Vietnam War veterans or draft dodgers, all of them, were fighting for their rights and social utopias. After numerous traumatic events they ended up (politically) disenchanted. Most of them backed out and changed their lives to the effect that they from now on focused on developing their personal identities.<sup>1</sup>

This essay refers to observations of American historian Christopher Lasch (1986) who called the 1970s a decade of narcissism. He pointedly described the nation's state in those days,

[those] who recently dreamed of world power now despair of governing the City of New York. Defeat in Vietnam, economic stagnation, and the impending exhaustion of natural resources have produced a mood of pessimism in higher circles, which spreads through the rest of society as people lost faith in their leaders. (Lasch 1986, 11)

On the basis of psychoanalytical concepts Lasch diagnosed a pathology that seemed to have spread to all aspects of American life.<sup>2</sup> In his definition drawn from Freud

the narcissist, driven by repressed rage and self-hatred, escapes into a grandiose self-conception, using other people as instruments of gratification even while craving their love and approval. (Siegel 2010)

Usually narcissism indicates a lack of self-reliance. This self-reliance is, as American philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson (1982) defines, the basis of an independent and happy life, an individualistic life never contrary to one's beliefs (see Hildt 2016, 79-83). In sports, or here more precisely in professional sports, for any peak performance self-reliance is fundamentally important. On that note the selected sport films provide a glimpse of each protagonist's pursuit of self-reliance and their effort to find personal freedom and secureness. It can be assumed that in the end it is all about self-awareness, in sports and in 'real' life. However, for most working-class and educationally alienated under-class people the quest for self-awareness or even personal freedom was (and still is) beyond reach or simply not of top priority. The majority was either too busy making a living or simply busy surviving.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For additional information on these complex socio-cultural key transformations the book *After Aquarius Dawned: How the Revolutions of the Sixties Became the Popular Culture of the Seventies* (2017) by American historian Judy Kutulas is highly recommended.

<sup>2</sup> Three years earlier, in 1976 American author and journalist Tom Wolfe had written a provocative cover story on narcissism in the *New York Magazine* which was called "The 'Me' Decade and the Third Great Awakening" (Wolfe 1976).

<sup>3</sup> See Jacob Holdt's *American Pictures* (1978) – a disturbing photo reportage on Holdt's journey through American underclass in the 1970s.

The chosen films mainly show the off-the-field events; for instance, the athletes in their team's locker room or weights room, during medical therapy or in their private lives. Besides the complex and crucial relationships between athletes, coaches, and club owners are illuminated. According to game and sports theorist Brian Sutton-Smith sports not only span the playing field but a complex communication system including coaches, fans, club owners, sportswriters, etc. (Sutton-Smith 1978, 80). Christopher Lasch emphasized that in professional sports like American football, baseball, or basketball the number of coaches, team doctors, and PR people exceeds the number of players (Lasch 1986, 142). Furthermore, the analysed sport films show how some non-conformist counter movements as well as sport itself are annexed and modified by the market economy and its interests.

The following reflections range from American history, play and sports theory, psychoanalytically inspired concepts, to Emerson's classic identity theory with a special awareness of the meaning of sports, and Hollywood cinema namely from a European and a sports scientific perspective.

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## 2. Essentials at a Glance: Pop Culture and the Meaning of Sports and Hollywood Cinema

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American pop culture is intrinsically self-referential and yet boundless by nature; this in turn causes a high permeability and makes it a multifarious archive – an ideal background for the following observations.<sup>4</sup> It is a diverse pop culture where one can witness the former first lady Michelle Obama and Miss Piggy reciting a poem together or in one of the clear-sighted episodes of *The Simpsons*, truly an ingenious piece of pop culture, Donald Trump as the acting American president ruining the country ("Bart to the Future" 2000). Apart from that, on May 27, 2017, Homer Jay Simpson was inducted into the (real) Baseball Hall of Fame – as a tribute to "Homer at the Bat," the classic Simpsons episode that aired 25 years ago.

The influential American intellectual Susan Sontag, a lifelong advocate of pluralistic and polymorphous culture, pointed out that there are contradictory impulses in everything (Cott 2013, 40). This concerns American pop culture in particular – a fascinating blend of styles, often enough grotesque but in its best moments simply brilliant. Sontag repeatedly pointed out that the false divide between pop culture and the allegedly 'high' culture limits us. Analogously

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<sup>4</sup> When reflecting upon the sports film the media and cultural scientist David Rowe called this multifarious archive "fan-sports-society-mythology-nexus" (Rowe 1998). Analogously, in the context of her studies on the US sport films, the sports scientist Barbara Englert (2011) called this nexus "Verflechtungsmatrix." Both of them agree that reflections on the sports film can only be relevant by knowing and regarding these sociocultural cross-connections.

German photographer Wolfgang Tillmans gets to the heart of it when reflecting on his own photographic art, “[i]t’s not by any means evident what’s important and what’s unimportant. As a matter of fact, it is all part of a greater world” (Dercon 2017, 41).

US sports as well as Hollywood cinema are an integral part of pop culture. Both are fundamentally American in terms of being audience-grabbing, entertaining, myth-carrying, and moneymaking. Acting as cultural glue they have a tremendous social outreach – nationally and internationally. At the national level they serve as a corrective creating a national identity and moral values moreover they are meant to serve in unifying multicultural differences – clearly a difficult task to undertake in such a heterogeneous and highly embattled social setting. At the international level they represent and multiply the American attitude, the concept of the so-called American way of live, and of course, the prototypical capitalistic American dream.

Concerning the socio-cultural meaning of sports, the sportswriter Robert H. Boyle concisely stated in 1963,

[sport] permeates any number of levels of contemporary society, and it touches upon and deeply influences such disparate elements as status, race relations, business life, automotive design, clothing styles, the concept of the hero, language, and ethical values. For better or worse it gives form and substance to much in American life. (Boyle 1963, 3-4)

In historical terms carrying the heritage of the Pilgrim Fathers the United States is a restless nation with a great urge to move. German Americanist Gert Raeithel describes the North American people as pioneers of the West continuing the Pilgrim Fathers’ traditions. Using a psychoanalytical approach Raeithel argues that most of them are characterized by a weak object relation. Hence, he credits them with the willingness to leave everything behind while having a penchant for distance and sight and of course: the desire to go west (see Raeithel 1981). That is why it is beyond imagination that Hollywood’s classic Western heroes give up riding into the sunset in the end. The (undeniable) urge for expansion (and for thrills) is reflected paradigmatically in John F. Kennedy’s New Frontier-politics as well as in sports like American football and baseball – whereas football strongly reveals the imperialistic aspect. So most probably there may be no quality more American than restlessness. No wonder that sports are instruments of national identity and assertion.<sup>5</sup> Emphasizing its New

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<sup>5</sup> Being all-American has been equivalent to being white, and for some it still is. Considering racial integration in baseball it was not until a large number of African American soldiers had lost their lives in World War II that their constant exclusion in US sports was not communicable anymore. In 1947 the signing of African American baseball player Jackie Robinson with the MLB team Brooklyn Dodgers eventually marked a turning point. It changed the original state of Major League Baseball forever and paved the way for the modern civil rights movement. Since then some remarkable progress has been attained but to this day (culturally-rooted forms of) institutionalized racism permeates the American society and its

Worldish uniqueness America reestablished its identity in explicitly non-European sports like baseball and American football, a consequent decision building a new self-concept, distinct and of its own. George Carlin, an American comedian and harsh social critic all his life, contrasted the two in a virtuoso manner,

Baseball is a 19th-century pastoral game. Football is a 20th-century technological struggle. Baseball is played on a diamond, in a park. The baseball park! Football is played on a gridiron, in a stadium sometimes called Soldier Field or War Memorial stadium. (quoted from Watkins and Weber 2008, C12)

In other words: while baseball represents nostalgia, infinity and beyond, football stands for the hard facts of life. They jointly mirror the nation's inherent polarity.

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### 3. Excursus: American Culture Essentials

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That sports and Hollywood cinema carry a great socio-cultural weight becomes explicit in the photographic work of multidisciplinary artist Taryn Simon. Her pictures elucidate what is essential to American culture. Among others it is the kinetic and the cinematic – mobility and the screen as French philosopher Jean Baudrillard put it (1988, 55).

One of Simon's pictures shows the Cheyenne Mountain Directorate in Colorado which was built in the early sixties to protect personnel and equipment from a thermonuclear weapon attack. Strikingly, this bunker has a recreational basketball court revealing on the one hand the importance of sport for American society on the other hand underlining the distracting and relaxing qualities of sport in such a tense situation.

Another photograph seemingly features an ordinary storeroom, no glamour at all; de facto it is the Lucasfilm Archives in California. There are props, costumes, and set pieces from George Lucas's iconic Blockbuster *Star Wars* (1977). Looking at the unglamorous items in this room one can hardly imagine how incredibly successful and influential this film has been and still is.

These two pictures, first published in 2007, are part of Taryn Simon's exceptional work "An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar" where she documented places that are essential to the US, its myth and its everyday func-

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sports (see Markovits and Hellerman 2002, 206-8). The former National Football League (NFL) Quarterback Colin Kaepernick courageously demonstrates how prevalent racial inequality and police violence against African Americans still is. When he began kneeling in protest during the national anthem in the 2016 NFL season he gave the social movement Black Lives Matter a new platform: the grand American sports stage. Kaepernick was fired by his then-employer San Francisco 49ers: probably the end of his career (see Gregory 2017).

tioning but remain closed to the public – thus literally hidden places (Simon 2007).

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#### 4. Depicting the *Zeitgeist*: (New) Hollywood Cinema in the 1970s

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While Hollywood films of the 1940s and 1950s were dominated by movie heroes like Gary Cooper or Gregory Peck playing humble characters, from 1967 on, the so-called New Hollywood cinema dealt with anti-heroes realistically personated by actors such as Nick Nolte, Gene Hackman, or Walter Matthau; all of them were predestinated to play losers, loners, and eccentrics. As film scholar Thomas Elsaesser put it, New Hollywood productions are marked by a certain pathos of failure (Elsaesser 1975, 13-9). The stage for a New Hollywood cinema was set in the late 1950s by New York documentary and experimental filmmakers like John Cassavetes and Andy Warhol. The vibrant New Hollywood cinema was based on the French Nouvelle Vague and its auteur theory gave directors at the time more creative and personal freedom. As part of contemporary visual and performing arts the films of New Hollywood were an artistic expression of the paradigm change in American pop culture. In a way New Hollywood's creative energy was both result and support of the countercultural movement. Besides the moneymaking and entertaining aspects, Hollywood films of this period served as a far-reaching platform for those filmmakers who wanted to express their doubts, beliefs, and concerns about the constitution of the American society as a whole. That is why iconic films like *The Graduate* (1967) or *Easy Rider* (1969) not only captured the spirit of the time but gave an accurate report on the state of society – in a strikingly realistic and unusually differentiated way.

A telling example was director and Hollywood-insurgent Robert Altman who, in the 1970s, rang the era of New Hollywood with his antiwar movie *M.A.S.H.* Altman, an outspoken football aficionado and pop culture expert, used sports to convey various aspects of American culture. In *M.A.S.H.* for example the maladjusted medical doctors of the Mobile Army Surgical Hospital, which were based directly in the vicinity of combat, distracted their fears and simulated a feeling of being home (and safe) by driving off golf-balls, playing football, sports betting, and having loads of sex.

In Robert Altman's following and more experimental film *Brewster MacCloud* (1970) the main protagonist, young owlish recluse Brewster lives in a fallout shelter of the iconic Houston Astrodome, the former home of the MLB baseball team Houston Astros. It was the first film shot inside the Astrodome – a holy place creating a specific and unique atmosphere.

Generally, the films of the 1970s are reflective of the *Zeitgeist*, visualizing a social pattern that American artist Claes Oldenburg put in drastic words in

1973, “[the] American problem remains the schizoid psyche and its reeling from one extreme to another, from puritanism to abandon, from solicitude to aggression” (Rose 1975, 221).<sup>6</sup>

Apart from their (*Zeitgeist*-)reflecting potential the “New Hollywoodesque” films also had a perceptible societal impact, to the effect that they took the place of the usually missing public discourses – at least to a certain degree.<sup>7</sup>

After the political murders of John F. Kennedy, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, and Robert Kennedy, the US defeat in Vietnam, Watergate and Nixon’s unfortunate presidency, America’s confidence was at a low point and no one could believe in political solutions anymore not to mention democratic and human-rights based principles (Lasch 1986). Driven by the desire to forget their entire collective past and without hope to improve the social and economic conditions, many intellectuals who were once actively engaged in counter-cultural movements retreated to purely personal preoccupations. As a large section of the American underclass was struggling for survival the more privileged ones frequently tried to overcome fears and anxieties by (expensive) psychic self-improvement workshops, like the protagonists in *Semi-Tough* (1977), as we will see later on.

In responding to the radical political and social changes of the 1960s and 1970s Hollywood films provide a more ambiguous, nuanced, and at times pessimistic perspective starting with *Bonny and Clyde* (1967) through to *All the President’s Men* (1973) and *Apocalypse Now* (1979).<sup>8</sup> Of course, this is also true for the sport films of the time, like *Downhill Racer* (1969), *Rocky* (1976), or *North Dallas Forty* (1979). Normally sport films from this period create a more complex engagement with the lives of athletes. However, talking about 1970s sport films one cannot but mention the exceptional phenomenon *Rocky*, a low budget production nostalgically emphasizing a ‘lost Americanness.’ The Italian underdog became a national and an international hero and is ingrained in the collective consciousness. It would seem that this kind of Cinderella story

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<sup>6</sup> Regarding the current sociopolitical situation in the US, Oldenburg’s statement is of great topicality again.

<sup>7</sup> A telling example is the antiwar movie *Coming Home* (1978) by director Hal Ashby. At that time leading actress Jane Fonda was married to radical intellectual counterculture activist Tom Hayden. Hayden, an American social and political activist all his life was one of the initiators of the influential leftist student activist group Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and one of the Chicago Seven defendants (originally Chicago Eight). Fonda, a visible countercultural political activist during the Vietnam War herself, admitted that many aspects in *Coming Home* grew out of her three years working with veterans and active duty servicemen (Behar 2011).

<sup>8</sup> The book *Paranoia im amerikanischen Film* by film scholar Gérard Naziri might be of peculiar interest in this context. The author analyses selected 1970s New Hollywood productions like *All the President’s Men* (1976), *The Conversation* (1974), and *Three Days of the Condor* (1975); he unfolds a pattern of governmental control/violence and hidden intelligence activities.



does not fit well in the realism of a New Hollywood. One could even say that simple minded *Rocky* was a throwback to the good old days before Hollywood became 'artsy.' In fact, the authentically portrayed character is a figure people can identify with. *Rocky* was a veritable counter-draft to the freakish losers and narcissistic hedonists of the time – a period when national identity was devastated or metaphorically speaking when Uncle Sam had a hangover. In response to this *Rocky*'s main mission was to strengthen the nation's impaired self-assurance by increasing his own individual one. Whereas from an ethnological perspective the film shows quite realistically urban tristesse, social abysms, and moreover provides an insight into the quite boring everyday life of the American underclass.

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## 5. American Football: Concerning the Hard Facts of Life

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Director Ted Kotcheff's football film *North Dallas Forty* (1979), starring Nick Nolte, certainly provides a more ambiguous and at times pessimistic perspective. The audience gains an authentic insight into the tough everyday world of professional football players including their unbounded drug use like heavy drinking, smoking pot, and taking tons of painkillers – all that in order to release their fears and relieve their pain and to be "fit" for the upcoming game.

**Figure 1:** Whooping It Up at a Regular Misogynist Post-Game-Party (*North Dallas Forty*, 0:14:11). Paramount Pictures.



One can witness the athletes' over-sensitiveness along with a massive lack of self-reliance and secureness and their to some extent aggressive behaviour, also against women. The film reveals the players' severe injuries as well as the impact of heavy emotional stress.

Nick Nolte plays the maladjusted anti-hero Phil Elliott who is dismissed, officially because he smoked marijuana and unofficially because of his non-conformist behaviour, or in his coach's words his "childish attitude." Nolte's character is in a personal dilemma: an identity crisis. Although he cannot imagine a world without playing professional football, he increasingly disapproves of the typically virile and violent customs of his teammates and frequently comments them in an ironic way – sometimes by citing Freud (what they of course don't understand).<sup>9</sup> His differing perception of life also finds expression in his new girlfriend, an independent and smart woman. Phil Elliott is not willing to adjust his attitude or adjust to stupid and anti-player-rules. In the end he is disillusioned, more precisely, he is distraught at his situation as an athlete and as a professional football player. Deeply emotionally moved he defiantly tells his coach (who is clearly on the owners' side), "we are not the team. They are the team. We are the equipment! But the only thing that's real in that game is me. And that's enough" (*North Dallas Forty*, 1:51:43).

**Figure 2:** Phil Elliott during Medical Treatment (*North Dallas Forty*, 1:19:14). Paramount Pictures.



Another memorable scene features one of Phil Elliott's team mates who expresses his frustration in an emotional outburst; a superb performance by John Matuszak, a well-known NFL-player. Matuszak, a two-time Super Bowl-winner with the Oakland Raiders, was one of the most charismatic and exces-

<sup>9</sup> In *North Dallas Forty* as well as in *Semi-Tough* – or regarding men's football in general – it seems that quite a few protagonists suffer from a so-called phallic narcissistic disorder, a term British-Hungarian psychoanalyst Michael Balint (1896–1970) used to describe the heroism of (male) persons with a weak object relation (Raeithel 1981, 45). This means that someone is most virile and childishly immature at the same time. In men's professional football whether it is an occupational disease or a precondition is difficult to say.

sively performing (on and off the field) NFL-players in his day. He showed an impressive authenticity when yelling at the disliked assistant coach,

I don't want no fucking job! I want to play football, asshole! I want some feeling! I want some fucking team spirit! Every time I called it a game, you call it a business. And every time I call it a business, you call it a game. No feeling for the game at all. You'll win, but it'll just be numbers on the scoreboard. Numbers, that's all you care about. That's not enough for me. (*North Dallas Forty*, 01:39:05)

Amongst others these two key scenes reflect what Christopher Lasch wrote about the degradation of sport. In his *Culture of Narcissism*, he lamented the way big money and free agency are turning the athlete into a mere entertainer selling his services to the highest bidder bound to his team only in a spirit of antagonistic cooperation, a term Lasch borrowed from sociologist David Riesman (1950).<sup>10</sup>

One of the most lasting impressions the film conveys, besides the negative and unpleasant aspects of professional football, is that the athletes feel the most comfortable, satisfied, secure, or let us say self-aware when they are in action on the field, or even in (constant) pain.

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## 6. Michael Ritchie's Sport Films: Humorous, Complex, and Socio-Critical Mainstream Entertainment

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In *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930) Sigmund Freud describes the fundamental tension between civilization and the individual. If people want to be part of a well-functioning *gemeinschaft* they have to accept the demand for conformity and instinctive repression – at least to a certain degree. In the late 1960s and 1970s the usually strong and highly developed willingness to repress oneself into conformity pretty much collapsed. People dissatisfied with their contemporary culture and without an orientation wanted to play the game of life without dropping out or changing the rules but without conforming either.

Director Michael Ritchie thematised this aspect in two sport films in a completely different way.<sup>11</sup> In *The Bad News Bears* (1976) he created a sports

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<sup>10</sup> Dave Meggyesy, a former linebacker with the St. Louis Cardinals and a committed civil rights and antiwar activist, is one of the critics on professional sports which Lasch listed in his book (Lasch 1986, 125). Meggyesy quit in 1969 at the height of his career to write his controversial memoir *Out of Their League*; he tells about the dehumanizing side of the game, about the racism, the fraud, the drug abuse, and the incredible violence on and off the field. Shortly before its publication Meggyesy was interviewed on the Dick Cavett Show where he spoke out decidedly and deliberately – a man who argued the case for social justice and personal liberation.

<sup>11</sup> In fact, Michael Ritchie did three sport films, a sheer coincidence. His first sport film *Downhill Racer* (1969) was produced by Robert Redford who hired Ritchie because he appreciated

utopia in a way that a most heterogeneous team becomes a well-functioning *gemeinschaft*. The leading characters are coach Buttermaker and his highly individualistic minor league team, a bunch of neighbourhood misfits and rejects from other teams. As film scholar Ronald Bergan describes,

[the] team includes a huge fat boy, forever munching chocolate bars, a couple of Mexicans who speak no English, a juvenile delinquent, a black kid who does Hank Aaron impressions, a Jewish boy, a near-sighted pitcher and a 12-year-old retired pitcher named Amanda Whurlitzer. (Bergan 1982, 65)

**Figure 3:** Coach Buttermaker and His Pitcher Amanda Whurlitzer Having a Serious Debate in the Dug Out (*The Bad New Bears*, 1:09:33). Paramount Pictures).



The team mirrors the pluralistic and multi-cultural American society while coach Buttermaker, an alcoholic and loser himself perfectly embodies the so-called pathos of failure (Elsaesser 1975). After unsuccessfully attempting to change the team into a winning team, he realizes the importance of letting each kid have its own oddity. By taking them as they are, he enables and fosters the

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his semi-documentary style. *Downhill Racer* starring Redford and Gene Hackman was about the madness of Olympic (ski-racing) competition and received rave reviews. American film critic James Monaco called it the best and most complex movie on professional sports ever made (Monaco 1985, 308). According to his preference for semi-documentary methods, Ritchie was working with amateur child actors in *The Bad News Bears* and using real football scenes and crowds in *Semi-Tough*.

growth of self-reliance in each child practicing what the Japanese psychoanalyst Takeo Doi (1982) describes as the Japanese way of getting personal freedom and emotional security while or rather because being dependent on others.

As teammates the kids are dependent on each other and in the film, they can bring in their individualities and feel accepted and secure – in other words, self-reliant. Relieved from the pressure to succeed no matter what the cost, they have the ability to develop their inner strength and to act out the joy of playing in a space far away from everyday life (see Sutton-Smith 1978, 196).

In his satire *Semi-Tough* (1977) Michael Ritchie laid the focus on the manners and mores of a 1970s society in which everything, from food to mental health, has been merchandized for the take-out trade, using the example of the professional football microcosm. Throughout the film we see some bored athletes intellectually unchallenged while searching for their personal identity – both as men and athletes. Ritchie's protagonists are torn between hedonism, boredom, and their search for the meaning of life. For a film about football *Semi-Tough* spends comparatively little time on the field and shows practically no interest in winning and losing – one of the most familiar aspects of American culture.

Burt Reynolds and Kris Kristofferson are the professional football players Billy Clyde Pucket and Shake Tiller. Apparently, both of them are tired of leading a privileged but boring pro-athlete's life, filled with extensive traveling (away games) and killing loads of time. Although they are easy-going by nature they find themselves in the middle of an (imaginary) identity crisis they both deal with differently.

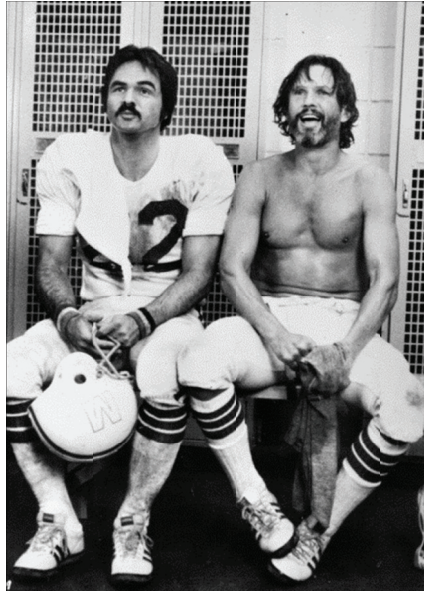
The more self-assured Billy Clyde devotes himself fully to nostalgia and adores the out-of-date singing cowboy Gene Autry and his schmaltzy patriotic songs; whereas the more hesitant Shake favours a cult-like self-improvement course called B.E.A.T. (Bismark Energy Action Training) where he tries to realize his true self by getting beyond societal conventions. Director Michael Ritchie patterned B.E.A.T. one-to-one on the real Werner Erhard seminar (EST), a more than dubious but enormously successful programme designed to break down a person's defences and then rebuild that person into an independent, forthright, direct individual. Writer Hunter S. Thompson called it pricey and demeaning behaviour modification sessions that preached the virtues of selfishness (Thompson 2000, 684).<sup>12</sup> Self-emancipation and the authority of

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<sup>12</sup> There were many celebrities and professional athletes amid the followers of the trendy EST. Like for example the infamous New York Jets Quarterback Joe Namath also known as Broadway Joe. The eccentric Namath who usually wore a fur coat, also when strolling the sideline, showed a good sense of humour when he did a commercial for women's nylons. In *Semi-Tough* Billy Clyde boasts about his commercial for condoms, "Come on boys, stick it in! It won't pinch, it's paper-thin" (*Semi-Tough* 0:14:15).

self-appointed psychological experts are a paradox, and it is beyond doubt that these seminars created new kinds of dependencies.

**Figure 4:** The Exhausted and Laid Back Billy Clyde Pucket and Shake Tiller Feeling Most Secure in Their Team's Locker Room (*Semi-Tough*, 00:03:02). MGM



Throughout the film, while watching Ritchie's protagonists trying out various self-improvements like B.E.A.T., pyramid power, "pelving" or "movagenics,"<sup>13</sup> it becomes increasingly apparent that Billy Clyde and Shake are the most relaxed and happy or simply, are themselves when sitting exhausted in the locker room or playing football on a muddy field in the pouring rain. One of Gene Autry's slow love songs accompanies this mud bath and says it all (ironically), "don't ever think of setting me free, 'cuz you're the only good thing that's happened to me" (Autry 1994).

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<sup>13</sup> In one scene we see a meeting of Billy Clyde and the owner of his club, Big Ed Bookman. Billy Clyde is pretty amazed watching his boss Big Ed, a great fan of the so-called movagenics, creeping on the floor amidst the adapted tiny little furnishing in search of his lost ego consciousness (*Semi-Tough* 0:43:13).

Sport itself, whether it is leisure or professional sports, seems to be the best self-improvement method.<sup>14</sup> At least it is one of the most effective ways to get beyond social conventions and constraints if only for a time.

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## 7. Conclusion

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Coming back to the introductory quote from Jean Baudrillard it can finally be stated, you always get the whole of the US in each of its manifestations – just like the Hollywood sport film. On that note this essay highlights that sport films in their best moments capture and visualize the inner strife of an ambiguous, often enough extreme, and sometimes schizoid but rarely boring nation. It is about a basic social pattern which award-winning screen- and sportswriter Budd Schulberg referred to as the “dilemma of a nation where idealistic individuality and selfish individuality are in conflict” (Schulberg 2008 [1941], 410). Given the major meaning of sports and cinema along with their close intertwinement with pop culture in general Hollywood sport films in particular are, without any doubt, a rich and diverse archive of visual sources for scientific research – not only for sport scientists but for the humanities as a whole.

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<sup>14</sup> This corresponds to what Brian Sutton-Smith pointed out, that the athlete, when highly focused on the sporting activity, is in a stage of total self-awareness without the unsolvable difficulties of self-consciousness (Sutton-Smith 1978, 196).

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*Downhill Racer*. USA 1969. Director: Michael Ritchie.  
*M.A.S.H.* USA 1970. Director: Robert Altman.  
*Brewster MacCloud*. USA 1970. Director: Robert Altman.  
*The Conversation*. USA 1974. Director: Francis Ford Coppola.  
*Three Days of the Condor*. USA 1975. Director: Sidney Pollack.  
*All the President's Men*. USA 1976. Director: Alan J. Pakula.  
*Rocky*. USA 1976. Director: John G. Avildsen.  
*The Bad News Bears*. USA 1976. Director: Michael Ritchie.  
*Semi-Tough*. USA 1977. Director: Michael Ritchie.  
*Coming Home*. USA 1978. Director: Hal Ashby.  
*North Dallas Forty*. USA 1979. Director: Ted Kotcheff.  
*Apocalypse Now*. USA 1979. Director: Francis Ford Coppola.

# Historical Social Research

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